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SUBJECT: FRANCE'S "NO" VOTE ON BIOTECH CORN

REF: STATE 14566

¶1. (U) In separate meetings emboffs delivered reftel points on DG Environment's proposal to approve two biotech corn varieties to the Trade Minister's Chief of Staff and the biotech advisors to the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Environment. The latter indicated France would vote against the approval of Bt11 and 1507 biotech corn products on February 25. (The Trade Ministry demurred, saying the Environment Ministry had the lead on the issue.) With regard to Syngenta's Bt 11 corn, our interlocutors justified the French position by saying the Bt11 protein is the same as the MON810 protein, which is currently undergoing its 10-year reevaluation process at the European level. (Note: MON-810 is subject to a cultivation ban in France, which the French are defending despite an EFSA finding that invocation of the safeguard clause was unjustified since no new threats to health or the environment had been presented. End note.)

¶2. (SBU) The advisors indicated that France's position on Pioneer 1507 corn is based on issues reportedly raised by the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) relative to the corn's impact on non-target species. In 2005 the French competent authority had raised questions with EFSA, including on non-target species, and, according to both interlocutors, had not received satisfactory answers.

¶3. (SBU) More generally, the advisor to the Minister of Environment emphasized that the current European biotech evaluation system does not address member states' citizens' concerns. She noted a gap between the EC's technical regulatory process and regulatory and political processes in the member states. Examples of citizens' concerns include the impact of biotech crop production on non-target species, and pest resistance to Bt, she said. She underscored the importance of the December 4 EU Environmental Council meeting, where proposals of an ad hoc group convened under the French Presidency were unanimously adopted. These included strengthening environmental assessment and monitoring arrangements, and soliciting member state input. Impacts on non-target species, long-term effects and ecological impacts of genetically-engineered (GE) products were identified as areas where more member state involvement was needed. In addition, she said, the Council emphasized the importance of unifying member state monitoring of GE crop production.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: France likely will push for recommendations from the December 4 Environmental Council meeting to be taken into account during consideration of subsequent biotech dossiers, including the MON 810 10-year review. Post has heard (and MinAg advisor confirmed) that France has undertaken a lobbying effort regarding the MON-810 reauthorization with EU partners. The effort likely emphasizes France's desire to see the December 4 conclusions

integrated into the review process. Since France has promised to condition its national ban on the conclusion of this review process, a delay or "no" vote by the standing committee would allow the French to keep its cultivation ban in place.

PEKALA